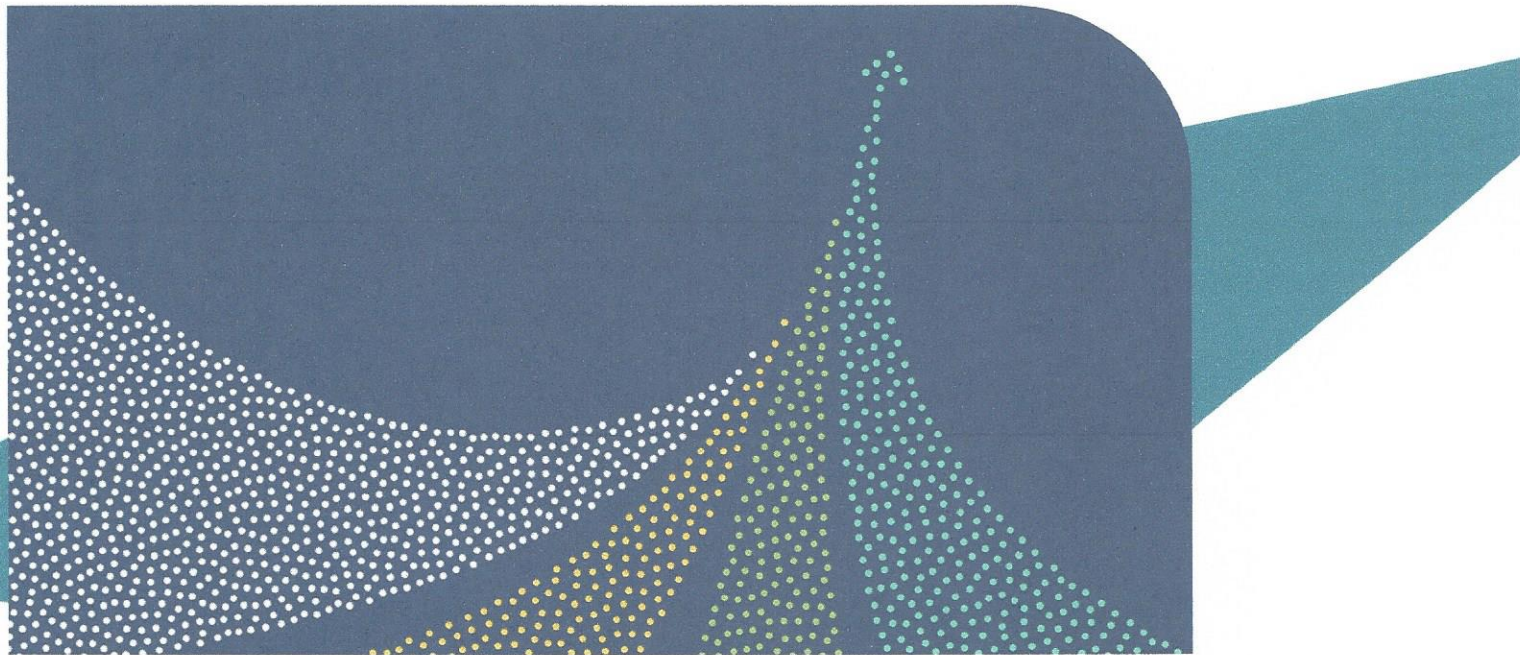


What Is Leadership?

Leadership is defined by 3 outcomes — direction, alignment, and commitment — and it's a social process, where individuals work together to produce results that they could never achieve alone.

Published May 15, 2024



The Definition of Leadership: It's a Social Process

Leadership is often described by what a leader does or the capabilities they have. Yet while the skills and behaviors of individual leaders are important, the true meaning of leadership is about what people do *together*. Said another way, everyone in an organization contributes to leadership.

So, what is leadership, really?

Based on our decades of pioneering research and experience, **we define leadership as a social process that enables individuals to work together to achieve results that they could never achieve working alone.**

Understanding [how leadership works](#) as a social process is important for several reasons:

- This definition of leadership avoids putting the entire weight of leadership on a few individuals — or limiting the leadership potential of others. Each person can discover and build upon their own leadership potential.
- This view of leadership is both realistic and adaptive — because **the truth is, leadership doesn't take place in isolation**. It reflects, responds to, and shapes many different relationships, cultures, and systems.
- It's also practical. When we define leadership as something that happens through the interactions among people with shared work, we have many opportunities to amplify leadership potential. Plus, in a group, a multitude of skills, perspectives, and expertise work together, making the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Any individual weaknesses are overshadowed by the strengths of others, and the team or group thrives — **accomplishing more together than any one individual could ever do alone**.

Management vs. Leadership: What's the Difference?

The terms management and leadership are often used interchangeably, but there are distinct differences, so understanding the definition of leadership vs. management can be helpful. The key difference between them:

- *Management* is the process of planning and control, while
- *Leadership* is the process of people working to achieve something together.

Both management and leadership are important for accomplishing goals or making change happen, and depending on your role, you will need to draw on aspects of both to be effective.

What Do Managers Focus On?

Management roles and responsibilities involve planning, organizing, getting things done, and solving problems. Effective managers deploy resources and work through others to gain efficiency, quality, and accomplish goals. The focus is on day-to-day operations and tasks, and ensuring employees meet expectations for what they do and how they do it. A good manager delegates tasks effectively; ensures the team meets any deadlines and targets; manages resources; and addresses conflicts efficiently.

What Do Leaders Focus On?

Leadership roles and responsibilities are broader, and involve influencing, inspiring, and bringing out the best in others. Leaders see the big picture, help others connect the dots, and fill in gaps. Effective leaders motivate and influence teams to work towards achieving a common goal, and invest in the whole — the collective people and systems needed to succeed. They set a clear vision, encourage innovation, and support personal and professional growth in others.

Whether you're currently leading people and projects, a team or department, or an entire organization, your role will involve aspects of both leadership and management, as both are important. And when facing a new challenge, goal, or situation, remember the definition of leadership as a collective process, and consider what's most needed in the moment: leadership vs. management.

With that clarity, you can learn or apply the skills, behaviors, and capabilities most likely to solve a problem or support the desired shared outcome — and guide others to play their part, too.

Defining Leadership By Its Outcomes — Direction, Alignment, and Commitment

At CCL, [our research](#) distills leadership down to 3 essential elements: direction, alignment, and commitment, or DAC, in our widely-recognized [DAC model for leadership](#).

This leadership definition moves beyond a focus on leaders, followers, and shared goals, and instead puts the emphasis on the shared *outcomes* of leadership. If all 3 elements – direction, alignment, and commitment — are present, then we know that leadership is happening.

The actions, interactions, reactions, and exchanges of multiple people produce DAC together. And while organizational leaders play a vital role in setting the tone and making space for DAC to thrive, everyone is involved in creating DAC.

When you understand how essential direction, alignment, and commitment are for what leadership is, you can see why we define leadership as a social process — not a solo effort.

Our definition of leadership puts focus on what effective leadership *does*. It recognizes that everyone can learn, grow, and contribute to shared direction, alignment, and commitment. And it creates space for many different leadership styles, individual personalities, and cultures.

But what exactly do we mean when we say that leadership is the result of DAC?

Direction

Agreement Within the Group on Overall Goals

Direction is a shared answer to the question, *where are we going?* It's an agreement on what a team or organization wants to achieve together and serves as a guide for setting shared goals.

With a collective sense of clear direction, everyone's time and energy go where they matter most. People know what to say yes and no to, and where to spend resources. They can see how their individual efforts fit into larger objectives.

Setting direction is an essential part of what leadership is, because it requires much more than just announcing a business target or even articulating a vision; it's about [purpose-driven leadership](#) that creates clarity and inspires and motivates others.

Alignment

Coordinated Work Within the Group

While direction is where we're going, alignment is how we get there.

With alignment, each person understands their role and how it fits with the work of their colleagues. Overall, there's a sense of coordination and synchronization. Confusion and miscommunication are reduced. Efficiencies are created, resulting in fewer redundant tasks, duplication of efforts, and multiple checks and cross-checks.

Creating and maintaining alignment can be especially challenging today among remote or hybrid teams, with members in different locations and time zones. It can be frustrating to try to collaborate with others because teammates are in a different place and time of day — leaving people feeling left out, unable to contribute, and confused about their role and what’s going on.

Effective leadership always requires a focus on *both* relationships *and* tasks, but that’s particularly true when [leading in a hybrid work environment](#) or with remote team members. Intentionally building trust and fostering coordination and interdependence can ultimately create greater alignment.

Commitment

A Feeling of Mutual Responsibility for the Group

Commitment is a willingness to make the success of the collective a personal priority, where individuals know that their own successes are connected to those of others. People can trust that everyone will make the effort needed to ensure the group is successful, with a balance of give and take.

When a culture of resistance or minimal effort is replaced by a sense of “being in it together,” managers don’t need to monitor activities so closely, or follow up many times on the same item. Team members are willing to give a little extra to ensure their group’s success, versus just doing enough to get by. With an increased sense of accountability and a [shared ownership mentality](#), change is supported, shared goals are achieved, and cultural transformation is possible.

But commitment cannot be enforced; it must be fostered. The most effective managers understand that leadership means respecting differences, and seek to understand the experiences of their employees and [build belonging at work](#), creating spaces where people feel their perspectives and contributions are valued.

How a Better Definition of Leadership Can Improve It

A shared view of the importance and meaning of leadership can actually help to improve the quality and consistency of it. With clarity on what leadership means, you can assess what’s going well and what isn’t — and take steps to improve how you work with others and accomplish what matters most.

So now that you know what leadership is and how to recognize when it’s happening, what can you do to improve it?

Fuel the Social Process of Leadership: Start by Diagnosing Leadership Challenges

If progress is stagnant in your organization or team, or in a community effort, think about leadership as an *outcome* that you want to achieve through direction, alignment, and commitment. This can quickly help you diagnose where you need to focus your attention to regain momentum. Some specific steps to follow are outlined below.

1. Watch for signs that DAC is weak.

How can you diagnose unclear direction, lack of alignment, or low commitment? Here are a few key signs:

- A lack of agreement on priorities or resource allocation
- People feel as if they are being pulled in different directions
- People are stuck, the same things are repeatedly problems or frustrations
- Team members are unclear about how their tasks fit into the larger work of the group
- Deadlines are missed, rework and duplication of effort are common
- Groups or functions compete against each other
- Only the easy things get done, there's a persistent gap between effort needed and effort given
- People put their own interests first, a sense of "what's in it for me?" dominates
- Inconsistencies between what people say and what they do

2. Bring in multiple viewpoints.

Go beyond your own perspective to engage your team and learn how others view the current levels of DAC. Hold a candid conversation about the outcomes of leadership in your group, team, or organization to get a more accurate picture of what's going on and understand the current issues and challenges. Be intentional about first [creating psychological safety](#) so that group members feel free to share openly what they think is going well and what's not.

- Try to gauge whether others agree on what you're trying to accomplish together. Ask if everybody is clear about how their task fits into the work of the group. Do they think their contributions are valued?
- Have colleagues, partners, or direct reports take [our quick and complimentary DAC assessment](#). Hold one-on-one meetings and focused conversations to share perspectives on what is going well, and where improvement would make a meaningful difference.
- Sometimes, getting everyone's mind out of the present and into the future is helpful. For instance, if the team was performing better 6 months from now, what would start happening? What would stop?

Based on what you learn, you can identify needed changes.

3. Take simple actions to address issues that emerge.

Every team, project, and situation will involve different leadership challenges, so how you address issues will require different skills, actions, and behaviors.

For example, you may realize that your group has clear direction and strong commitment, but the processes and the systems and the way the organization is set up is chaotic. That means that *Alignment* is the area that needs the most work, and so the collective effort should focus on improving how work is accomplished. In other situations, it might be low levels of shared *Commitment* and/or *Direction* that are the biggest pain points to address.

While there are no quick fixes or single solutions, you can make progress on improving DAC levels with small changes such as these:

- **Expand your network.** Involve a more diverse group of people as you plan or make decisions, communicate more broadly, and build in connection points with people, groups, or functions whose work or interests are related to yours. Taking [a network perspective enables leaders](#) to get more tasks accomplished through influence and the power of their relationships.

- **Go beyond surface-level relationships.** Try to understand what really motivates your team members, what information each person needs to make sense of the goal, and [encourage leadership purpose](#) to help each individual connect the larger objectives to their own work.
- **Improve interactions within the group.** You might change the frequency or format of meetings or updates, streamline a key process, or consider [establishing team norms](#) or [setting up a team charter](#) to turn the team's values into agreed-upon behaviors and operating agreements, if those weren't in place already.
- **Hold candid conversations.** Give greater effort to building trust, rapport, and a deeper understanding of the group's perspectives. Ask for feedback, ideas, and concerns. Hold open discussions about changes that are needed and why, and use [active listening skills](#) to learn others' views.
- **Help your team manage priorities and competing demands.** Consider more frequent check-ins, clearer accountability structures, and focus on helping to address or remove roadblocks for others, which will help the team make progress and also demonstrates [compassionate leadership](#).

Investing in Leadership at All Levels

When everybody at an organization understands what leadership is and how to support DAC as part of their role, *more* leadership happens. The results of more leadership include:

- Increased agreement on group and organizational priorities;
- Clarity on how individual tasks fit into the work of the larger team; and
- Individuals who prioritize the success of the collective.

Implications of This Relational Definition of Leadership

This more relational understanding of the meaning of leadership has important implications for leadership development. As [our research](#) has noted, it underscores the importance of *not* focusing on development solely for individuals in positions of authority or who have been deemed “high-potential,” but rather, **the importance of building leadership capacity for the collective — teams, workgroups, and organizations.**

But effective leadership across all levels doesn't come automatically; knowing how to contribute to the leadership outcomes of direction, alignment, and commitment must be learned and practiced. This requires an intentional investment in growing leadership at all levels.

We can begin by honoring the unique starting point of individual leaders, helping them grow their self-awareness and leadership skillsets and mindsets. We can also work to foster an increased understanding of the meaning of leadership within teams and groups — ultimately creating a profound ripple effect across entire organizations and communities.

Amplifying Leadership Potential With Development

Providing the right learning at the right time for *all* talent — from individual contributors to frontline managers, and from team and cross-functional leaders through senior executives — is the key that unlocks organizational performance, engagement, and retention. Some key steps to amplify leadership potential across your organization:

1. Encourage good leadership and make development accessible.

The most effective leaders consistently show the [characteristics of a good leader](#) such as integrity, self-awareness, courage, respect, compassion, and resilience. When individuals learn and improve these essential leadership qualities, and more, the social process of leadership becomes smoother and more effective.

But just knowing what good leadership looks like isn't enough. In our decades of research and hands-on experience, we've found that people are more committed and engaged when they have a clear career path, ample professional and personal leadership development opportunities, and the support they need to become the best possible version of themselves. Leadership development prepares individuals to navigate change and builds collective capacity to solve pressing problems.

Unfortunately, access to opportunities for growth and development isn't always available. Our [research on emerging leaders](#) found that 60% of young professionals worldwide feel that access to opportunities for leadership development is inequitable.

Fully supporting emerging leaders can include actions such as working against systemic exclusion from the past and [providing more equitable access to opportunities](#) in the present. A variety of leadership programs, courses, and tools can fit together like puzzle pieces to tailor your organization's large-scale training and retention initiatives and make leadership development more accessible to all.

2. Grow teams together.

When [building high-performing teams](#), remember to focus on more than just star power. Of course, having the right people with the right leadership capabilities is important, and each person should know why they're on the team. That's key. But that's just one of the 4 components of team effectiveness, and the only one that considers individual people, or the level of talent and ability within a team. As the other 3 aspects of [our research framework on team effectiveness](#) emphasize, an effective team supports direction, alignment, and commitment, reflecting that what leadership is about, really, is people working together to produce collective results.

And instead of only having individuals move through leadership development independently, picture the power of teams growing *together*. By establishing strong direction, alignment, and commitment, team members will all work together more seamlessly, improve outputs, and expand potential for impact.

3. Scale for organization-wide impact.

Imagine the impact that would result in your organization if there was a shared understanding of the definition of leadership, and a leadership vision, language, and behaviors were all linked to critical business needs. What if direction, alignment, and commitment were strong and vibrant, rather than an unfamiliar way to define leadership?

By implementing and scaling leadership development enterprise-wide, organizations broaden access to learning, [provide equitable access to opportunities for growth and development](#), create new capabilities across the enterprise, and foster the social processes needed for effective leadership. In fact, organizational investments in leadership development have been repeatedly shown to:

- **Improve bottom-line financial performance.** Superior human capital management is an extremely powerful predictor of an organization's ability to outperform its competition.
- **Attract and retain talent, strengthening the leadership pipeline.** As a result, employee retention is 20 times greater at companies with a focus on leadership development.
- **Drive strategy execution and facilitate organizational alignment.** Done right, leadership development unquestionably delivers impact and fosters alignment.
- **Increase organizational agility and change readiness.** When facing an unpredictable business environment, 86% of companies with strategic leadership development programs are able to respond rapidly, compared with 52% of companies with less mature leadership programs.

While it can be a challenge to deliver high-impact development opportunities at all leader levels and to large populations, organizations can still enjoy the many [benefits of leadership development](#) by supplementing their own in-house training resources and teams with content and support from outside experts and proven leadership development providers.

4. Create a ripple effect in society.

As individuals, teams, and organizations come to understand the meaning of leadership and how to create greater direction, alignment, and commitment, their leadership potential is expanded, and the impact can ripple outward — making a difference not only in their lives, but also in the lives *they* touch.

That's why we say that systemic societal or community problems cannot be solved by individuals alone. Given their size and complexity, [confronting so-called "wicked problems"](#) takes many people working together to uncover the roots of the issues and find sustainable solutions.

This reality truly underscores that when we embrace a more relational and collective definition of leadership, we open up the possibility of transformational change for everyone — from individuals and teams to entire organizations, and even larger communities and society.

What Does Leadership Mean to You?

Now that you know the research-based definition of leadership involves the outcomes of direction, alignment, and commitment, and that DAC enables people to achieve more together than they ever could working alone, *you* can decide what effective leadership means to you and the mission and goals of your organization, group, or community.

When you see areas of strength and what's holding you back, you can take targeted and intentional action to develop your capacity to lead — and help others do the same. The result? More people reaching their potential, making faster progress, and finding better solutions — together.

Ready to Take the Next Step?

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With over 30 years of experience at CCL, Cindy has contributed to many aspects of CCL's work: research, publication, product development, program evaluation, coaching, and management. She designs and manages R&D projects, coaches action learning teams, writes for multiple audiences, and is a frequent speaker at professional conferences.

About CCL



At the Center for Creative Leadership, our drive to create a ripple effect of positive change underpins everything we do. For 50+ years, we've pioneered leadership development solutions for everyone from frontline workers to global CEOs. Consistently ranked among the world's top providers of executive education, our research-based programs and solutions inspire individuals in organizations across the world — including 2/3 of the Fortune 1000 — to ignite remarkable transformations.